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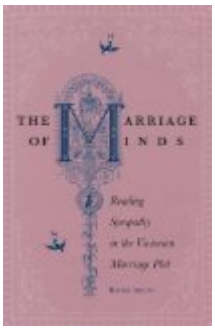
Rachel Ablow. *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. vii + 231 pp. $55.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-5466-8.



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In *The Marriage of Minds*, Rachel Ablow offers a new perspective on the relationship between reading, one of the favorite activities of the Victorians, and the institution of marriage, and how society viewed that relationship. In contrast to other works that deal with a similar theme and to avoid being overly subjective as the result of the critic's possible feminist bias, Ablow opts to begin her argument from a historical perspective. She effectively utilizes the Victorian legal doctrine of coverture to summarize the Victorian tendency to identify "the household rather than the individual as the basic social unit," and to explicate her argument as being an in-depth exploration of the popular nineteenth-century conception of the similarity of the roles of wives (to be a positive influence to their husbands) and that of novels (to be a moral beacon to readers) (p. 10). The usage of the word "sympathy" throughout the text, therefore, should not be interpreted according to its twenty-first-century association with emotions, such as pity and compassion, but instead according to the author's own definition of the term as "a psychic structure through which the subject is produced, consolidated, or redefined. It is less interested in sympathy as a feeling, in other words, than in sympathy as a mode of relating to others and of defining a self" (p. 2).

To anyone interested in Victorian literature and culture, the understanding of the relationship between marriage and reading is indispensable, because its influence not only proved to be crucial to the development of literature throughout the era, but, in a way, also contributed to the evolution of the replacement of poetry by the novel as the dominant form of literary consumption during the early part of the nineteenth century, the time when Thomas Arnold's teachings on morality first began to influence society. Readers who are unfamiliar with the concept will discover in Ablow's text an important point of reference that illustrates the importance of the phenomenon and explains its implication from both a literary and social perspective. However, the objective of Ablow's book is far more ambitious than to narrate simply the development of this relationship. She actively seeks to locate her study within ongoing debates concerning Victorian literature and culture, and to understand different authors' us-

age of the marriage plot in their novels to explore perceptions of sexuality and the family.

By examining the works of such famous novelists as Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot, as well as showing how the setup of the marriage plot in their novels unveils their different ideas concerning reading and writing, Ablow offers an interesting investigation into the Victorian perception of the relationship between sympathy and the novel. According to her findings, although in the works of these authors one can clearly detect a general awareness of an existing relationship between the two issues, how each author interprets this very relationship can be radically different, even oppositional to one another. For example, in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), Dickens actively "offers a defense of the effectiveness and desirability of 'female influence,' and attempts to claim that influence for the novel form" (p. 45). While for Emily Brontë, "the notion that readerly sympathy in any way predicts relationship in the real world simply reproduces the insidious myth that anyone consistently privileges others' interests above their own. In her view, therefore, rather than a supplement to marital sympathy, marriage-plots like Dickens's simply help obscure the utter powerlessness of married women" (p. 45).

Although the fact that Dickens and Brontë held dissimilar views concerning marriage and, thereby, sent different messages about marriage in their fictional works should surprise no one, the critical insight provided by Ablow into how these authors interpreted and negotiated the relationship between readers' physicality (reading) and mentality (sympathy) is nonetheless astute and original. While some of the chapters--in particular the one on Wilkie Collins and the sensationalization of masculinity in *The Woman in White* (1859)--tend to follow too closely the pattern of such earlier works as Lyn Pykett's *The Sensation Novel: From The Woman in White to the Moonstone* (1996), this is not really a flaw, because Ablow's purpose, from the very beginning, has more to do with presenting, through these authors, a general picture of Victorian society's interpretation of reading sympathy than any single author's view on it. In this aspect, Ablow's overall argument merits high commendation in its provision of a clear and well-constructed thesis that offers an incorporating view concerning society's general interpretation of reading and sympathy, as reflected in the works of the examined authors.

Unfortunately, the text's greatest strength--its comprehensiveness in providing varying views of different authors on the idea of reading sympathy--may, in a way, also be its biggest flaw in the sense that the desire to compare authors inevitably results in each author being presented as having a static frame of mind, instead of a developing one. In other words, Ablow does not consider the possibility that an author's conception of marriage and sympathy might have changed with time, which the study of more than one text by a single author written at different conjectures of his or her life might demonstrate. For example, Ablow argues that Dickens's theorization of domesticity is not always as positive as it appears to be, that "rather than serving to bring the family together, the marriage plot can actually function to keep the family apart" (p. 44). While this is true in the case presented by Ablow, instead of holding on to the same view about family life throughout his career, Dickens's understanding of the relationship between marriage and sympathy is actually something that evolved and changed over time. For example, prior to 1850, Dickens's outlook on marriage is typified by such characters as Ruth Pinch, for whom "no doll's-house ever yielded greater delight to its young mistress, than little Ruth derived from her glorious dominion over the triangular parlour and the two small bedrooms."[1] This opinion, however, is ostensibly reversed in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) when Bella declares her wish "to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house."[2] To attempt to understand an author's views on a topic

according to one book eliminates the possibility of finding the changing view of an author and how that change is attributable to a changing society as well as how the novelistic work in turn influences that very society. Moreover, Ablow's decision to span the timeframe of her study over decades, in which an 1847 Brontë is contrasted with a 1869 Trollope, also significantly weakens the historical implication of her thesis, and leaves readers wondering about the possibility of social events and increasing public awareness influencing society's perception of reading sympathy in general.

On this note, *The Marriage of Minds* deservingly ranks as one of the more cogently argued and readable literary criticisms of Victorian literature of recent time. Yet, readers who are more interested in the study of the production of the novel as a whole in relation to Victorian social discourses (rather than in how selected novels reflect the Victorian perception of the issue of marriage and sympathy) will probably not find the text to be as beneficial.

Notes

[1]. Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. Patricia Ingham (1844; London: Penguin, 1999), 564.

[2]. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, introduction by Andrew Sanders (1865; London: Everyman, 1994), 679.